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ABSTRACT

This ethnography reports on how power flowed along communication channels and how communication was the means through which power was exercised and developed when the author was a participant-as-observer in a 10-week Spanish language class offered by a major manufacturing company to its line supervisors. The paper focuses on whether or not class attendance was truly voluntary following a memo regional management circulated and on the cultural content covered in the class. Segmented power relations in the institutional structure, as illustrated by the memo, led to material communicative practices (the language class) which attempted to convey various ideologically produced interpretative frames (e.g., personal success, teamwork, enhanced task effectiveness, and Anglo-American superiority) to the line supervisors. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/RS)

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Observing Power and Ideology in a Corporate Language Class

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Abstract

This ethnography reports on power and ideology issues that surfaced when I was a participant-as-observer in a 10-week Spanish language class offered by a major manufacturing company to its line supervisors. It focuses on whether or not class attendance was truly voluntary following a memo regional management circulated and on the cultural content covered in the class. Segmented power relations in the institutional structure, as illustrated by the memo, led to material communicative practices (the language class) which attempted to convey various ideologically produced interpretative frames (e.g., personal success, teamwork, enhanced task effectiveness, and Anglo-American superiority) to the line supervisors.

You will be given future job opportunities if you can communicate in Spanish.... You don't have to read or write it very well....What's happening to us here is what's happening across the country... We're just a microcosm... And it's happened to us later... We aren't prepared... It hit us so quickly... Its happening whether we like it or not. If you take this opportunity you will excel.

Isabel, corporate-sponsored Spanish class instructor

Demographic changes are escalating in United States organizations and research is needed into the patterns, processes, and problems occurring as people from different cultures interact in the workplace (Triandis & Albert, 1988). Since the 1980's, increasing numbers of Hispanics (e.g., Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Latin Americans) have entered the civilian workforce (Cattan, 1988; Sanchez & Brock, 1996) and by the year 2005 they should make up eleven percent of the United States workforce (Statistical Abstract, 1997). As a result, large and small companies employ a more multicultural workforce. While this situation is not unique in this country given our past history regarding immigrant labor and the situation facing employers along the East, South, and West coasts, it is experienced as unique by many companies located in the country's heartland.

In light of such demographic trends, various authors discuss the positive benefits of cross-cultural diversity training (e.g., Albert, 1994; Triandis & Albert, 1988), but cultural training may not always be effective at increasing open and equal communication. The current ethnographic study is based on an industrial Spanish language class I attended for four months which was offered to the supervisory personnel of two manufacturing plants. Since most workplace ethnographies have focused on laborers, research is needed into the situation facing managerial groups (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). Therefore, this study focuses on a supervisory population and identifies why the benefits of the language class might be less than optimal for increasing meaningful cross-cultural communication.

Like an increasing number of communication ethnographies (Trujillo, 1993), this ethnography takes a critical turn (Thomas, 1993). Although scholars have highlighted the importance of studying issues such as power and ideology, few researchers have shown how such

concepts apply in actual organizational processes (Mumby, 1993). One role of critical organizational communication research is to illustrate the processes through which power is manifested and shapes organizational reality (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). "The social construction of organizational reality is characterized not by the straightforward repression of one group by another, but rather by the complexity of various discursive practices that define what it means to be an organization member" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 39). Like meetings (Mumby, 1988), the language class provided a routine context in which social reality was constructed, maintained, and displayed as various organizational issues were played out between supervisors and management. Ultimately, the language class was meant to influence the Hispanic employees' social reality.

This study investigates how power flowed along communication channels (e.g., a top management memo, class lectures) and how communication was the means through which power was exercised (memo) and developed (class lectures) (Frost, 1987). Hegemony and ideology issues surfaced in the supervisors' introduction to the class, their motivations for attending the class (i.e., career advancement, team membership) and the cultural content covered in the class. Ideological control (Alvesson, 1993) emerged in how supervisors responded to the "opportunity" to take the language class and in the content covered. As a deep structure game (Frost, 1987), the class existed to direct and shape line supervisors' attitudes, behaviors, and interpretive schemes for the benefit of the organization. This ethnography illustrates three functions of ideology: 1) representing sectional interests as universal; 2) reifying humanly created phenomena so that they appear fixed and immutable; and 3) creating hegemony where a subordinate group identifies with a dominant group's goals and values (Mumby, 1989). The class exists as a double-edged sword. Designed to improve cross-cultural communication, it also reinforced power dynamics and cultural stereotypes.

The next section describes the class, my entry into it, my subsequent role, and the early regulars. After that, the ethnography focuses on how lagging class attendance led to a memo from the regional manager and some of the power and ideology issues surrounding the memo. Then, the

ethnography focuses on the cultural content conveyed in the class. The conclusion includes the content of our final class meeting, and provides suggestions for alternative ways to conduct such a class.

The language class, my entry and role, and the early regulars

The language class. A large manufacturing company located in the central United States with plants in 20 states and 14 countries sponsored the class. A massive demographic shift began occurring in 1993 at the two plants surrounding the organization's corporate offices. By 1996, 48% of the workforce in one plant were native Spanish speakers and in the other 39% were Spanish speakers. The company faced the challenge of having a local workforce increasingly composed of non-English speaking immigrants being managed by non-Spanish speaking Anglo-Americans. They decided to met this challenge by encouraging Hispanic employees to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the plants after work and by encouraging line supervisors to take an industrial Spanish class after work.

The first time I met Isabel, the instructor of the Spanish class, she told me that the company contacted her a year earlier when one of their large plants became unionized. The company thought the union vote was due to communication problems at the plant. Isabel spoke English and Spanish fluently, taught ESL classes, and translated for area industry and law enforcement. She had moved around the world every two years until she was 12 years old when she settled in Mexico and ultimately met her Mexican husband. About five years ago they moved to the U.S. When I met her, her shoulder length dark blonde hair was cut in a shag, she was in her 30's, about 5' 6", wore glasses, smiled frequently, and was pregnant.

For 10 weeks I studied Spanish with Isabel and between four to 19 line supervisors twice a week from four to six p.m. on a local technical institute. It was the second such class this organization had offered its managerial employees. Top management had taken the initial class. In the class I attended, most people wore their company uniforms to class. Some appeared disheveled

having already put in eight hours of factory labor. Our classroom held six long tables which seated four people per side, plus Isabel's table up front. Each time we met we spent an hour there, sitting in moveable chairs which became uncomfortable after 30 minutes, studying Spanish vocabulary and grammar. The words and phrases we learned were specifically relevant to the industry and the line supervisors' jobs. Then we moved down the main hallway to a room where 12 IBM-compatible computers were programmed to help us recognize and use relevant Spanish words. Participants received two Xeroxed notebooks, a corresponding audiotape, flash cards, and an English-Spanish dictionary.

My entry and role. After moving the state, I became fascinated watching the primarily Anglo-American community adapt to the influx of Spanish-speakers. I wondered what it was like to work where employees and their supervisors literally can not speak the same language. Two years before this ethnography, I began attending local multicultural forums; monthly meetings for anyone interested in discussing aspects of the demographic shift. Attendees varied widely and included educators, human service workers, hospital personnel, city administrators, law enforcement personnel, housewives, retired persons, immigrants, and industry representatives. I met Jennifer there. She was the organization's corporate human resources manager. Jennifer introduced me to Sarah, the regional human resources manager, who told me to call Isabel. Isabel accepted me into the class saying she had worked with a researcher before and found it an interesting experience.

When new members came to the class I introduced myself as someone from the University who was interested in how people communicate in a workplace where employees don't speak the same language. Everyone knew my purpose and signed an informed consent form. I told them I was taking notes on the lessons because I was trying to learn Spanish, which was true since my role was participant-as-observer (Babbie, 1995). My field notes included class content notes any

student might take, along with observations of what I saw, felt, said, and overheard. I worked without predetermined questions recording as much of my environment as I could.

My classmates were always friendly. Over time, I worked and joked with different individuals, and discussed family and weekend plans. However, although a part of the classroom setting, I remained an outsider. Everyone else worked together eight to ten hours a day and many had done so for years, rode to class together, or socialized outside of work. I could never completely fit in or understand the multi-cultural challenges facing these line supervisors.

By the fourth class meeting, I wanted to drop the project. Language acquisition is difficult for me and I was discouraged by my inability to take ethnographic field notes while learning Spanish. I'd looked foolish trying to speak Spanish and had hidden behind a veil of my hair when answering Isabel's questions. My university colleagues suggested I videotape the class. I packed up the equipment and took it home but didn't feel good about this solution. My classmates had signed informed consent forms that said nothing about videotaping. Videotaping felt invasive and unethical. The next class, I attended sans the video camera focusing more on recording the classroom interaction than on language acquisition. However, I continued to do all the in-class exercises and practiced Spanish at home.

The early regulars. The early regulars included Jack, Carrie, Anne, Martha, and Ted. Both Jack and Carrie were management trainees who appeared interested in upward mobility as well as in the language and culture. Jack said his best friend who was from Puerto Rico had been teaching him Spanish before being transferred to another department. Carrie grew up with a Spanish-speaking maid and seemed proud of her culturally diverse background. She described herself as "the eternal student" and prepared her own flash cards choosing the words she used the most. She said, *Lots of times I need to know the direction or location words we are studying like above* (arriba de), *under* (debajo de), *between* (entre), *and to the right* (a la derecha). Anne supervised four first-level supervisors and rarely interacted with Hispanic employees, but when she did it was

very important. She was quiet and initially reluctant and shy about learning Spanish. However, she worked hard on the lessons using the flashcards and practicing her Spanish with Hispanic employees. Martha worked with 15 Hispanics daily and was Anne's subordinate. She remained quiet and tentative throughout the class but appeared supportive of Anne. One evening Isabel complimented Anne on how quickly she was learning Spanish. Anne smiled. Martha, who was back in class for the first time in several periods, was sitting beside Anne as usual. She said, *Anne is always flashing those cards at work.* Anne replied, *I work at it.* These four early regulars finished the class. However, Ted did not.

During one of the initial class meetings, I worked with Ted, a dark-haired, olive skinned man in his later 40s, to form sentences using verbs and pronouns. He told me that before this class began, one of his bilingual Hispanic employees came to his house several times a week so he could learn Spanish and his employee could practice his English. Later, as we walked to the computer room he told me, *About 75% of the people I work with speak only Spanish. I worked with someone for a year before I knew he could speak some English.* That evening, in the computer room after everyone else left, Isabel and I discussed why there were fewer students this time (6) than last (8). Isabel's shoulders drooped and she looked weary as she said, *Dropouts are very normal and we will see a lot more of that as the course progresses*. I asked her about Ted. She said, *He attended the ESL class last year with some of his employees in order to learn Spanish through watching them learn English. He begged me to offer this course. He's a good man—one who actually makes friends with his subordinates*. Ted's last night was four class periods later. The previous class period he couldn't extemporaneously form a sentence at Isabel's request. During a plant tour I saw him working in a hazardous area. Why did this motivated "good" man drop out? Was it the pressure of working in a hard job and then attending class? Was it due to his loss of face in being unable to extemporaneously form a sentence? Was it part of his angry reaction

to the memo the regional manager sent to all line supervisors which subsequently will be discussed?

Two other early attendees who also dropped out are worthy of note. Sam and Tom attended class sporadically, generally were disruptive, and seemed only minimally involved. One evening after they had been disruptive in the back of the room I asked Sarah, the regional human resources manager, about them. She said she'd spoken to Sam in the past about his attitude and hadn't recommended he be promoted. After she transferred, he was promoted *but he's on his last legs with the company*. I asked why he was in class and she said, *I think it is because his supervisor is trying to get him to save himself by displaying some enthusiasm.* She also described Tom as a problem employee who is verbally aggressive to his people—curses at them. She said, *He'll do a fine job some other place in the company but isn't making a good manager.*

Now that the scene is set for the class, the next section focuses on the predominant themes of this critical ethnography. Upon reviewing my field notes, two major themes emerged as relevant: voluntary attendance and cultural content. The next section focuses on the power and ideology issues that influenced the line supervisors' attendance.

Reasons for attending the class: Required or voluntary?

According to Isabel, the company originally intended the language training to be mandatory for all supervisors due to the perceived unionization threat but subsequently made it voluntary. The next section focuses on whether class attendance was truly voluntary and how organizational power and ideology function to make things appear "voluntary." While people believe they have freedom of choice, actually their options are carefully (and unobtrusively) controlled (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993).

The first class period, only ten participants attended. Sarah, the regional human resources manager, repeatedly made comments in class indicating she was worried about the low attendance. She assured Isabel that the regional manager would "*take care of*" the poor attendance when he

returned to the office next week. Privately, I wondered what "take care of" meant but Sarah told us all that the company would not force anyone to attend. After class, Sarah told me 5% of the regional managers and clerical staff had just been laid off. Everyone at the regional office was reassigned. She called this one of ten "Golden Opportunities" facing the company as earnings stagnate, raw material costs rise, and investors earn record dividends. I consistently am struck by the irony of Corporate America's practice of renaming potential hardships to cast them in a more favorable light. Although this "Golden Opportunity" only directly impacted regional office employees, the line supervisors might also feel uneasy and, therefore, choose to attend a highly visible class being promoted by regional management.

As illustrated in the description of the early regulars, the first few weeks people appeared to attend because of their careers, their interest in the Hispanic cultures and peoples, or their desire to be better supervisors. By the fifth night only five participants attended. The sixth night 10 people attended. After class, I approached Isabel and asked, *Quite a few more people are here today. What happened?* She said, *Someone probably told people to come.* She asked Carrie, *Why so many more people here today?* Carrie replied, *A memo was sent out telling people to come.* Isabel said, *Yeah, it wasn't very cost effective for the company with only three or four students.* Earlier, I overheard Isabel discuss cost with Sarah and the ten week session cost between $15,000 and $18,000 with fewer participants costing more. The seventh night 19 people attended. Apparently, upon his return, the regional manager had "taken care of " the low attendance by writing a memo to all line supervisors. Comments from Sarah suggested she authored the memo and the regional manager reluctantly and humorously signed it. Its text follows,

The Memo

> *One of the biggest challenges facing us is communication. The future depends on us, as managers, to develop positive relationships with our work force.... Because 35% of our work force is Hispanic, learning the Spanish language and customs is essential. Stop and look at your latest hires. How many are Spanish speaking?*

I would like to thank and congratulate the managers that completed the Spanish classes we provided. To the managers that have enrolled in the current class, I want to thank you and give you encouragement to keep up the good work. You are working toward that positive relationship that is so essential. To those of you that have not enrolled, it is not too late.... You can "catch-up" with the rest of the class.

We can move forward and enjoy learning new things or we can stick our heads in the sand and hope that it goes away. The managers that lead (this organization) into the next century will not have sand on their faces.

I initially was pleased with the memo because it highlighted communication's importance and seemed to indicate the organization's concern for a strong positive relationship between Hispanic employees and line supervisors. My empirical work indicated there was room for such improvement in this organization (see Allen, Amason, & Holmes, 1998; Amason, Allen, & Holmes, 1999).

This memo includes a variety of influence strategies (Frost, 1987) designed to increase class attendance including reason, ingratiation, altruism, and a threat. But, at an even deeper level, hegemony and ideology issues are being played out. Hegemony refers not only to one group's domination over another but also the way in which one group actively supports the dominant group's goals even if these goals are not in their best interests (Mumby, 1988). In the memo, the regional manager articulated the company's interests in such a way as to make both groups' interests appear to be the same. Communication functions ideologically as it produces and reproduces a particular structure of power relations to the exclusion of other possible interests (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). The memo functioned ideologically to enforce the regional manager's right to have employees attend class on their own time, without additional compensation, in order to further their own career goals, but more fundamentally further the company's interests. By focusing primarily on profits as an organizational ideology, critical theorists often overlook the role of a managerial ideology emphasizing personal career gains (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). The career gains ideology is clearly illustrated in this memo.

The February afternoon after the memo circulated was sunny and 60 degrees. I arrived 15 minutes early and sat in the sunshine with my Jeep window down. Ted was talking with two men and one woman who attended the class. I overheard, (The organization) *should pay for this... They are the ones forcing us to go to this. If they're going to make us go to this they should pay for us to start the beginners class.* Although I did not say so, I agreed. Earlier I'd asked Isabel what incentive the company provided for those who attended the class. She said probably just paid time off from work. Indeed, paid time off was not provided.

Later, in the classroom, Isabel asked the newcomers about their language background. Several had some Spanish in high school, one dropped it several times in college, two indicated they were learning some at work, and several said they paid no attention to the language. Isabel said, *You will not leave here fluent. You will be able to communicate your needs if you stick with the course. I'll lose half of you in a couple of weeks. That was last time. But then I had no one who was told to come. How many of you are jumping up with excitement to take this class?* Six of the 19 people raised their hand.

After class, four or five of my male classmates were standing in the parking lot. I walked by and said, *What is this, a study session?* Someone replied, *No. Its a gripe session.* I got into my Jeep. A newcomer, Wayne, left the group, came over, and we talked about why I was there, where he was from, where we had lived (states), and his time in the service. I asked, *Why the gripe session?* He indicated it was because management ordered them there on their own time saying, *I've already put in 11 hours today. By the time I get home, I'll have two hours to see my wife between now and tomorrow afternoon* (she works nights). We talked about how many people he supervised and how long he'd worked for the company. He rolled his eyes and frowned slightly when describing how the company started appearing not to care for its employees about three years ago. Wayne, who supervised the largest group in one plant and had worked for the company almost ten years, did not finish the classes.

Wayne's situation illustrates a conflict between employees' interests and those of the company. Such hegemony is often kept in check by an ideology that hides the conditions under which people work and governs their actions according to the company's needs (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). Given his career aspirations and because management said the class was good for the company's continued growth, Wayne began attending the Spanish class on his own time. But, his attendance caused him to sacrifice elements of his personal life. Perhaps he dropped out due to the stress the class placed on his personal life. I never knew. "The definition of workplace life excludes consideration of any issues (e.g., a private life) other than efficiency, productivity, and profit," (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 323). Clearly management felt it had the right to ask for such personal sacrifices since a private life is clearly marginalized (Mumby & Stohl, 1991). While the line supervisors complained about the situation and, therefore, perceived it as unfair or a hardship, they still attended. The organization's right to strongly suggest the class as an avenue for advancement was seen as legitimate and not resisted. I never witnessed anyone seriously questioning management's right to imply that the line supervisors' careers might be affected by their attendance. The regional manager's power was embedded in the organization's structure. "Deep structure power is so deeply embedded in the organizational system that issues and challenges to the power holder are unlikely to arise at all" (Frost, 1987, p. 506)

On our eighth night Isabel entered the computer room where five of us including Sarah, the regional human resources manager, were working. Jack was talking with Ron, a quality control supervisor with one year of college Spanish. Jack and Ron had practiced Spanish together the previous week. Jack made a comment about *sand in the face* (a quote out of the memo). Sarah said, *Yeah. He* (the regional manager) *is proud of you*. Someone commented about how at one of the plants all the people that could be spared had already been attending class. Apparently, a top supervisor brought the subject up in a staff meeting and made attendance a priority. His subordinate who had kept some people from coming got the message. Even more attended on the

eighth night. Sarah asked Ron and Jack if they'd attend a higher level class if one was offered. Jack said, *Can I be honest?* The tone of his voice indicated concern although I didn't hear exactly what was said. After about 20 minutes Jack wanted to leave early but Ron said, *No. Don't you want to be part of the* (organization's name) *team? A team player?* Once again, although I could not hear what was said a note of disillusion seemed to enter his voice. A week later I overheard three line supervisors discussing an intermediate Spanish class saying they needed a day class. Apparently their plant supervisor remained concerned that the language class was *sucking them from the night shift*. I heard Ron say, *The letter was clear from* (the regional manager) *that this is something he thinks needs to be done*.

Once again ideology emerges. In this instance, it involves being a "team player." Being a team player means you go beyond your individual job duties to support your coworkers' goals and interests at one level, but at a more fundamental level you work extra hard to support the company's goals. Mumby and Stohl (1991) describe how the pressure team members exert on one another really contributes to the managerial interest of workforce control. The teamwork ideology legitimates the subordination of any and all other claims (e.g., family) on an employee's time. Presence in the workplace (or classroom) "is equated with human worth and dignity while absence is associated with disrespect and disloyalty" (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 320).

In this excerpt, we also see that higher levels of management were not unified. Frequently, critical theory conceives of *management* as a unified force and hides distinct interest differences between various groups (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). A basic tenet of critical studies is that organizations are created and shaped within the context of struggles between competing interest groups (Mumby, 1993). Here, various levels of management struggle to institutionalize dominant meaning structures. The plant supervisor is concerned with daily production issues. The regional management is concerned with more abstract and long-term issues like effective cross-cultural communication.

In the short run, the memo increased attendance. Immediately after the memo, 19 people came. However, by the last class period only eight attended. When we look at whether or not the attendance was voluntary, technically it was. However, the ideologies of career advancement and being a team player which surfaced in various written or oral forms potentially influenced attendance. Also, deep structure power was played out in how people responded to the memo by complaining yet complying.

In the next section, I focus on the cultural content being conveyed in the class. On the surface level, the class was designed to enhance task accomplishment by allowing the Anglo-American line supervisors to communicate more effectively with their Hispanic employees. At a deeper level, the content functioned to reinforce managerial control and cultural identities. It is unlikely that it promoted honest, open, or supportive dialogue between the line supervisors and their Hispanic employees.

Cultural content conveyed

Deep structure politics, hegemony, and ideology emerged in the language content conveyed during the language class. "Deep structure politics are initiated by actors representing an interest group to influence whole patterns of thinking, feelings, and behavior of other interest groups without the latter recognizing the political nature of the system" (Frost, 1987, p. 525). Some deep structure political games involve socialization mechanisms (e.g., the language class) which direct and shape the desired attitudes, behaviors, and interpretive schemes of some for the benefit of others (Frost, 1987). It is important to look at the language class' cultural content to identify managerial ideology (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). In class, the values and ideals conveyed which benefited the company included using friendship as a manipulation tool and issues related to power in the Anglo-American supervisor and Hispanic subordinate relationship. The ideological control spectrum is broad (Alvesson, 1993). Sometimes the initiator reproduces ideas he or she takes for granted and other times proposes ideals and values he or she does not believe in except in terms of

influencing others. I strongly doubt regional management told Isabel what cultural content to convey. However, they generally were aware of her content because most had taken the initial class six months earlier. They probably learned about the humble eager-to-please Mexicans. Such knowledge, coupled with their concern regarding unionization, may have prompted their patriarchal response of offering a class where line supervisors could learn to better understand and manage their Hispanic employees.

Prior to the first class, Sarah had told me the company's top management originally was just concerned with the language difference. Now, they were more interested in learning about the culture and "*the type of people the Hispanics are.*" Initially, and throughout the weeks that followed, Isabel told us she would explain the Hispanic culture to us. I had read about cross-cultural communication differences and attended multicultural forum meetings to learn more about Hispanics and was eager to hear from someone else who *knew*. Throughout the class, I eagerly absorbed what she told us and shared her content with my family, friends, students, and community members. The line supervisors also probably took the information she conveyed at face value. Only after I read my field notes did I realize the information's potentially political nature.

Isabel was in a powerful position because one of the most important areas in which power is used occurs in the struggle over meaning (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). By highlighting some aspects of the Hispanic culture she influenced her students' understanding of their Hispanic employees' behavior. Several times Isabel commented on what nice people the Hispanics were, how willing they were to help us learn Spanish, how appreciative they were of our efforts to learn, and how they would not make fun of our efforts to learn. She provided examples designed to create understanding and sympathy.

For example, one day in mid March we were learning how to place the following words indicating questions at the beginning of a sentence: donde (where), cuando (when), quien (who), cual (which), que (what), and como (how). Isabel mentioned to the class that Myria (I) should have

heard the AM talk radio discussion the previous day. People called in about the ESL classes at the company complaining *why don't the Mexican's learn English* and *company supervisors shouldn't have to learn Spanish*. This radio call-in show was an illustration of how the mass media can form and reinforce racism (van Dijk, 1987). Personally, I was tired of hearing such comments as they regularly surfaced in the community. I think it's important to work together to create a positive multicultural community. When I hear such comments I generally gently challenge the speaker's assertion. During this time period, I did so using information like Isabel provided below. I am sure the line supervisors also heard such comments and wonder how they responded. Anyway, talking about the radio show got Isabel on a soapbox and she said,

> *We've got to be part of the change in attitude....Pass the word on. Some of you may say you are taking this class... 'Because I have to so I can get ahead at the company'... And that's not a bad reason to take the class. But to tell someone who can't read or write in their own language that they should learn another language is a joke. Some Hispanics don't try to learn English....But the reality of the situation is the folks coming up here are not the middle/upper class like my husband and Tammy's are. They are blue collar workers but not like the blue collar workers in the U.S... Nine times out of ten people will enroll in an ESL class but get so intimidated because I write on the board and others are writing and they can't write. They are very shameful. This is one of the biggest obstacles. The second obstacle is that many of the Hispanics where you work have two jobs. I don't know if you knew that.* (A few people nodded their heads 'Yes'). *They may be getting four hours sleep a night like our friend Mike here.* (I look at Mike and his eyes are really red).
>
> Mike said, *I'm about fried.* (Working) *the weekend killed me.*
>
> Isabel continued, *You can't learn on four hours sleep. You can hardly work with four hours sleep. Another obstacle is that they are cramped in a little apartment with 10 other people who may have been strangers. They don't live that way in Mexico. These men are subjected to social things they don't understand here. They are perpetually tired. They are in culture shock. When you put all these conflicts together and tell them it is their responsibility to go out and learn a language, they aren't going to do it. They're barely functioning in this society.*

However, much of the cultural content conveyed carried subtexts other than understanding and sympathy. We learned how to manipulate the Hispanic employees and the information she conveyed potentially reinforced our views of Mexicans as ignorant, inferior, and submissive. It was

as easy to see the Hispanics as "other" after the class as it was before it began. As such, communication between the Hispanic employees and the Anglo-American managers is one of heterophily. This means it is communication between two or more people who perceive themselves as unalike (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1964). While few studies exist investigating cross-cultural stereotypes in organizations (Triandis & Albert, 1988), some of the cultural content conveyed in this language class reinforced our stereotypes. "White people 'learn' about minorities mainly through talk and text" (van Dijk, 1987, p. 383). Certainly the prejudice expressed in this class could have been more blatant (see van Dijk, 1987), however it still existed.

As someone with a Hispanic background and husband why did Isabel tell us some of the things she did? Was it because she thought that material was useful or acceptable to the managerial mindset? Being paid by the organization to teach language and culture would certainly influence the content she conveyed. Comments criticizing the Anglo-American behavior and culture or the organization's treatment of its employees would be very unlikely. Or perhaps she was simply unaware of the picture that emerged from the cultural information she conveyed. Ideology is deceptive because it may arise from the structure of society rather than the specific overt interests of the dominant group (Mumby, 1988). But in the end, power was exercised consciously or unconsciously in the interests of dominant individuals and groups (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993).

At our first class meeting, Isabel talked about the different cultural expectations between the supervisors and their Hispanic subordinates. She said knowing these cultural differences would help the supervisors learn the language as well as better understand the differing communication interaction rules.[1] She promised to show us strategies for manipulating and developing relationships. During our third class we discussed the verb "to be", and the difference between estude vs. tu. Isabel told us we can use estude to show respect but that this also puts distance between the two people speaking. *You will want to use tu. He* (the Spanish speaker) *will use tu back and a friendship is forming. You have to get on their level as soon as you can and act like a*

friend. This is a way to manipulate, to manage your relationship. This is something I am sure you as managers want to do. I was surprised by her blatant comment and how it fit my perception of why management had the line supervisors taking the class.

In giving this advice Isabel was encouraging referent power (French & Raven, 1959). Referent power is based on identification which involves having a desirable, satisfying, and self-defining relationship with the other person (Kelman, 1961). This is a less obtrusive type of control (Pfeffer, 1981) and would be an especially effective[2] potential control mechanism from this organization's point of view given unionization concerns. Also, in telling us how to manipulate Isabel reinforced a deep structure organizational game and disproportionately empowered the line supervisors over their Hispanic employees.

During our fifth class period, Isabel discussed how to give commands,

> *As soon as you say please you are softening it until it is no longer a command. You need to be aware of the cultural differences at work when you give a command. The people you are working with are most likely to be from one of two groups.... About one-third of my ESL students are illiterate, about a third have a second grade education, and the upper third may even have some college....Anyway, the illiterate people probably come from a small village and have a way of looking at authority. They look at you like you are next to God. You are a white superior version of what they'd like to be. They have been told in Mexico that they are worthless. They have low self-esteem and are humble. You have all seen them in the plants. They duck their head down and will not look you in the eye. They don't demand anything for themselves. They are intimidated by anything in writing because they can't write. Those that can have taught themselves....Since you are the boss and you feel confident about yourself they will do anything for you.*

A critical view of communication is political as well as representational and shows how "discourse can function ideologically to produce, maintain, and reproduce certain kinds of power relations within organization structures" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 41). Ideology "articulates a view of reality which maintains and supports the interest of dominant groups and suppresses those of subordinate groups...reifies dominant meaning formations as the natural, sensible order of things—'just the way things are'—so that social structures are not longer perceived as humanly

constructed" (Mumby, 1988, p. 73). Isabel's statements are political in that she describes whites as superior. By describing this power dynamic as just the "way things are" it is unlikely to become negotiable (Gramsci, 1971). And we see the third function of ideology, reification (Mumby, 1988), taking place as she describes the social relations as objective and independent of the people involved. As an Anglo-American I felt powerful listening to her, pitied the Hispanics, and admired their courage. Was that Isabel's purpose in making these statements?

That day, in her description of the Hispanic employees Isabel said,

> *The second group is coming from California and Texas. They are completely different from the Mexicans. They may call themselves Latinos or Mexican-Americans or Chicanos. They grew up in the U.S. in Spanish speaking neighborhoods and didn't have to speak English... They are a tough group of people. They have seen things we haven't seen. They know the ins and outs of the American culture. The Mexican from Mexico has no idea of welfare....Mexicans don't like Latinos. Mexicans look at Latinos as if they are all from L.A. and all do drugs. The Mexican from Mexico drinks. God forbid he touches a drug. He's very religious. Latinos don't like the Mexican because he's ignorant and dirty.*

During our 7th class period Ted asked, *How come when you use a translator they say a lot more?* Jack replied, *They need to put it into context.* After telling us that being able to communicate without a translator gives us more authority Isabel said, *You never know what they are saying. Nine times out of ten that person who is bilingual is Latino... You'll ask the translator to very nicely say 'Pick that material from the floor.' And the Latino will say, 'You little mother fucker pick that material up!' It's best to try and talk with them the best you can face-to-face and with hand gestures.* Sarah said, *Some will not even translate for us.* Isabel asked, *Is it the Latinos from on the border?* Sarah said, *Yes.*

These excerpts illustrate that on at least two different days Isabel championed one group (Mexicans) at the expense of the other (Latinos). Given the hostility she notes between the groups, her time spent living in Mexico, and her Mexican husband, such attitudes are understandable. However, by sharing such insights with the line supervisors she consciously, or more likely

unconsciously, shaped their view of the two groups. This supports van Dijk's (1987) work on interpersonal communication's role in shaping and conveying group attitudes regarding prejudice.

The next section identifies some of the content covered in our final meeting. This content reinforced themes we had heard during previous classes. Following that, the conclusion suggests how the class might be modified. Certainly corporate language classes that include cultural content will continue to have related hegemony and ideology issues. Yet it is possible to take some steps which might make it a more useful and positive experience both for the participants and the Hispanic employees with whom they interact.

Conclusion

Our final meeting. This night we were working on command terms and how to make commands with irregular and regular verbs. Eight line supervisors were present; four of whom attended the first class 10 weeks earlier. Isabel entered the room, greeted us and said,

> *Well, this is the end of the road. I know many of you are sad. Don't laugh. I respect those of you who stuck it out. I know it wasn't easy. I admire you. I'm not sure I would have been as strong willed if I were you since you are all working. These classes make for long hours....Your company is the only company* (in the region) *that is doing what it is doing in pursuing language so actively. Not general language but* (company) *language per se. You've got the personality types to achieve. You're intelligent, bright, and committed. You would all be up and running in another six months of language. What would be the one thing for you to learn the language, retain it, and learn more?*

Carrie, *Use it more.*

Isabel, *That's right. You've got to find someone who will talk with you in Spanish. Anne tries to find some way to speak with someone during the week. Hispanics have a very giving culture. If you want to learn the language and you are the supervisor they will go out of their way to help you. And they will not laugh at you when you make a mistake. Latinos might laugh. Mexicans will not, they would rather die.*

Lou Ann, one of the post-memo attendees, said, *One of Rosa's* ***little*** *guys is having a class with you. He is so impressed that you are Rosa's teacher also.*

Isabel, *They respect you more for trying to learn the language. And you reach a higher level of sensitivity and know more what it is like when people say, 'If they move here, why don't they learn the language.' It takes about ten years for the*

average Hispanic to acquire a second language socially. We can't wait for them. I'm excited to see motivated people like you. You are pioneers. I plan to do this the rest of my career. In ten years I'll still be talking about this group. You stood out as unique. You will all go places.

"Discursive practices can function ideologically to create a particular kind of situated identity and understanding of self-interest" (Deetz & Mumby, 1990, p. 43). Isabel once again stressed the career advancement ideology. She built a positive self-identity for us and tied our identity to the organization. I saw no evidence from the behavior of the people whom I had interacted with for ten weeks that they found this self-identity unattractive. Once again, she pitted Mexican against Latino. Once again, she tried to create cultural understanding. But the ideology which emerged only denied contradictions and worked to create hegemony by legitimating meaning structures which favor the powerful (Mumby, 1988).

Final comments. Each of us uses an ideologically produced interpretative frame to understand our reality. These interpretative frames are produced and reproduced by the actual communicative practices of social actors. These practices are framed within the segmented power relations of the institutional structure (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). This ethnography shows how the segmented power relations of the institutional structure, as illustrated by the memo, led to material communicative practices (the language class) which attempted to convey various ideologically produced interpretative frames (e.g., personal success, teamwork, enhanced task effectiveness, and Anglo-American superiority).

As demographic changes intensify in the United States, more executives confront diversity issues. This organization's regional management attempted to deal with diversity by having line supervisors attend a language class. Several paradoxes emerged regarding the class. First, the line supervisors' proposed empowerment resulted from management's insistence. Somehow empowerment and insistence seem contradictory in spirit. Second, the cultural content conveyed reinforced the Anglo-American self-identity as superior, benevolent, knowledgeable, and powerful

people. Some of these characteristics do not appear in descriptions of the optimal self-identity of competent cross-cultural communicators (see Spitzberg, 1997).

Although I'm sure regional management felt it was effectively enlisting the line supervisors' participation in an excellent course, language classes are not an easy answer to encouraging genuine cross-cultural communication. If chosen as a tool, however, I suggest several alternatives regarding its implementation. The early regulars generally were the ones who completed the class. This suggests management should remove obstacles to attendance before announcing the class and then let highly motivated people choose to take the class rather than urge the less interested. In addition, attendees should be compensated in some way (e.g., time off or money).

Given her background and language skills, Isabel appeared a good choice for instructor. I generally felt the information I received in class was insightful, accurate, and designed to promote cross-cultural understanding. I think Isabel did her best in selecting course content. It was only upon reflection as I read my field notes that I saw the darker side of the content conveyed. Sometimes it is difficult to see the ideology emerging in the statements surrounding us.

I also have several final comments regarding the cultural content conveyed. One solution might be to teach classes composed of both groups working together with Anglo's learning Spanish and Hispanics learning English. Teams of one Anglo and one Hispanic could practice language and voluntarily exchange cultural content. Such a team structure might create interpersonal relationships which combat our tendency to see members of a different culture as "other." The cultural content conveyed would be of specific interest to one or both of the parties versus generic and might be less likely to be stereotypical. The avoidance of stereotypical information would be enhanced if participants were encouraged to discuss materials related to their own experiences rather than their general culture. What I am proposing is akin to the Community Language Learning technique (LaForge, 1975) that allows conversational topics to emerge from students and

members of various language groups to work together. While still a respected technique, the Community Language Learning technique is rarely used because of its labor intensive nature. But the technique's strength is that it may allow for more open and meaningful cross-cultural communication by building understanding between the conversational partners. However, due to power and face maintenance issues superiors should not be paired with their subordinates.

I entered the class to gain understanding as to what it was like to work with people who did not speak my language. Upon leaving it, I realized how problematic forming such classes can be and how their structure and content might perpetuate issues related to power and ideology. Although I provide suggestions for alternative ways to introduce and conduct industrial language classes, I do so with reservations. Organizational theory generally seeks to increase the levels of control that organizations can exercise over their members (Mumby, 1993). The advice I offer here has the same end result.

Endnotes

[1]Researchers have found such differences exist between Hispanics and Anglo-Americans in terms of communication rules (Collier, 1988; Knouse, Rosenfeld, & Culbertson, 1992; Martin, Hammer, & Bradford, 1994), and workplace interaction norms.

[2] While positive superior-subordinate communication relationships are very important workplace relationships (Jablin, 1979), their importance in the plants may be even higher. Supportive relationships are extremely important to the successful assimilation of all immigrants (Kim, 1995), increasing their positive sense of self. Of course, the entire concept of "successful assimilation" is in itself ideologically charged. Pride and positive public recognition is especially important to Hispanic males (Kras, 1995).

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